

# Hands' Meaning

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Akira wanted a rival. In walked Shindou Hikaru, abrupt, abrasive, brilliant... and refusing to care. Not everyone's life is a game.

Status: complete

Published: 2011-02-05

Updated: 2011-02-07

Words: 13211

Chapters: 3

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Friendship/Drama -  
Characters: Akira T., Hikaru S. - Reviews: 91 - Favs: 725 - Follows: 198

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6716803/1/Hands-Meaning>

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# **Hands' Meaning**

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# Chapter 1

A/N: So, here's the thing. I'm not really interested in the Hikaru no Go fandom at the moment (though I do still hope to complete Stepping Stones eventually), but I found this story among my older stuff already actually complete, so I decided why not put it up since others might enjoy. Who knows, maybe posting it will help revive my interest.

Warning for those who read, since it's old it might not be up to my current writing standards but since it's late and I have work tomorrow you'll have to take it as is. From what I recall I did a tiny bit of research about JSL when writing this, but the sign used for 'goodbye' is from American Sign Language since I couldn't find any description of the Japanese equivalent online. \*shrug\* If anything's awkward, unclear, or glaringly unfactual let me know and I shall do my best to fix it. I'll probably post the next part tomorrow (er... technically, today) or the day after.

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"Is this your first time in a Go salon?" twelve-year-old Akira heard Ichikawa-san ask, as she had a hundred times before. He didn't hear an answer, but he wasn't paying attention; he was recreating the game he and his father had played that morning, nominally to study his weaknesses so he could improve but really just to keep his hands busy. Akira's mind was always occupied with Go and didn't need the help, but occasionally his hands got restless in between opponents at the salon.

At some point he looked around and noticed that there was another boy who looked about the same age as him playing against Kitajima-san, but aside from mild surprise and pleasure that other children actually did play Go he took no note. At some point after that he finished recreating his game and, hands satisfied, cleared the goban and folded them in his lap preparatory to beginning another game in his head. At that point he happened to look up and saw that the

other boy had finished playing Kitajima-san and was looking at him, hands in pockets.

"Would you like to play?" Akira asked to be polite, gesturing to the goban.

The boy looked at him for another second, then shrugged and took the chair across from him.

"You'll probably want to go ahead and lay down five or six stones--" Akira began, but the boy ignored him, grabbing a fistful of stones from his pot to *nigiri*. Akira hid his surprise, set down two in response, and got white. They started playing.

The other boy was better than Akira expected--much, much better--in fact, nearly on the same level as himself. And considering Akira's level was nearly that of the pros, he was understandably shocked. And excited. Go was, for Akira anyway, not a game where rivals were to be despised; it was such an insular world that he had no rivals to challenge him--before today. He burned with curiosity to know who this boy was, why he hadn't ever heard of him before, who had taught him to play such marvelous Go.

Akira won, and hardly noticed. He opened his mouth to ask his first question--and the other boy moved right into recreating and discussing the game, without saying a word. At first Akira didn't even realize what he was doing, except suddenly moving around both colors of stones on the board with brisk *tap-tap-taps* instead of the placing *pachi*, but then the new patterns clicked and he understood. Most Go players only discussed hands that could have been played differently and the results of them; this boy actually laid them out instead, tapping the stones at their original positions and then rapidly reforming them, tapping again to emphasize points. It was strange, but intriguing.

Akira waited until he finished a hand and then laid out his own version, what could have happened if black had responded elsewhere, and saw why the other boy had suddenly switched to

holding the stones like a beginner as he shifted them around-the traditional index-middle finger hold Akira had always used was deftest at putting stones down, not lifting them again without jostling the stones around them. So they both moved stones like amateurs, got into a minor scuffle over one shape as they both tried to show their differing opinions at once, and ended abruptly before Akira even realized when the other boy stood up, grabbed his jacket, and left. Ichikawa-san appeared at Akira's side just as he finished blinking, unfortunately preventing him from bolting after the other boy and demanding answers-for what, he wasn't quite sure, but he wanted them.

"Did you have a good game?" Ichikawa-san asked, looking at the goban.

"Yes, very," Akira answered distractedly, trying to think how he could find that boy again.

"Oh, good; I felt so sorry for him when he first came in. I guess Go puts everyone on an equal footing, doesn't it?"

Akira pulled himself out of his preoccupied thoughts and looked up at her with confusion. "What? I don't understand."

She looked surprised. "You didn't notice, Akira-kun? The poor boy was deaf."

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The next week passed in slow agony for Akira, having to remember not to hold his breath while he waited to see if the other boy would return, trying to think how he could find out his name if he couldn't speak, wondering rather illogically why he was deaf. There seemed to be no hope of finding him if he didn't choose to return himself; Ichikawa-san, with her notoriously soft heart for boys, hadn't made him sign in at the counter when he wanted to just go on in and even if he did come back it wouldn't be reasonable to try to insist he had to do so the second time. But when Akira considered the possibility of there not being a second time, he quickly decided that the boy's

name took secondary importance. He wanted to play him again! To see if once was just a fluke, if his skill really was so close to Akira's own, if he could be a rival like Akira had never fully imagined before. Surely he felt the same way—surely he'd come back to find out too!

A week passed and he didn't appear. When he did on Saturday the tension that dispelled in Akira's stomach, in his entire frame, was so great that for a moment he felt like he had left his seat and was floating above it. He kept sitting, outwardly composed, caught in a strange feeling of wanting to smile and to explode and just breathing slowly and regularly while the other boy paused at the doorway and looked around, hands in pockets, then nodded to Ichikawa-san as he headed toward Akira's empty table, and sat down across from him with no preamble.

Akira got out his pot of stones, feeling a greeting rise to his lips but letting it die as he remembered the other boy was deaf. (It was probably just as well, as he couldn't be sure he would have actually made a very polite greeting considering how many other things were buzzing around his mind.) As before, they played, then 'discussed,' but this time when Akira reached for a stone to disagree the other boy smacked his hand lightly before he touched it.

Akira pulled back, shocked and stung, and the other boy finished, then removed his hands from the board and gestured for Akira to take his turn. Akira went to the stone he had meant to before, keeping wary attention on the other boy with his peripheral vision—if he interrupted, he'd just get a smack right back—and noticed, as he continued his alternate play, the other boy's hands twitch once or twice but that he restrained himself firmly and kept them in his lap. So there were rules of polite conduct for this show-not-tell version of discussing, and he had just chosen to inform Akira of them impolitely. Well, so far they seemed reasonable enough; he would follow them.

They played and discussed twice before the other boy glanced at the clock, rose, and grabbed his jacket. Akira rose with him, mouth half open as he tried to think of some nonverbal way to ask if he would

be back next week, and could only watch in helpless frustration as the other boy raised one hand in the air, palm flat, as he walked away-the most dismissive goodbye Akira had ever seen.

After a moment he slowly sat back down and began rearranging the stones with sharp *clacks!* and the occasional *pachi!*, simmering and trying not to.

It had been a very good game.

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The third Saturday the other boy came Akira had prepared beforehand, but spent almost the entire afternoon playing with no difference before he finally found a good opening and worked up his nerve. The other boy paused in the more laid-back game they were playing after they had somehow wound up in an intense war from the center outward and stretched, glancing around the room. Akira gave himself no more time to doubt and quickly picked up the notepad and pencil waiting in the chair beside him, carefully printed 'My name is Touya Akira' and pushed it across the table, finding himself holding his breath.

The other boy picked the pad up and read it. His eyebrows went up; then he gave a small shrug, set the pad aside, and kept playing. Akira felt flummoxed. And illogically irritated. So he'd heard of Touya Akira, but hadn't known who he was playing?-and, most importantly, didn't feel the need to respond with the *obvious* common courtesy of giving his own name?

Ichikawa-san came over to his table again after the other boy had left and he was again slapping stones down by himself, lips pinched together. That boy was the rudest he had ever met. And he acted too casual about playing Go. What a rival!

"It looks like you two are getting along wonderfully, with how much you play together!" Ichikawa-san said with brightly misplaced optimism.

"I tried, but he doesn't seem to care," Akira said sourly, putting away the stones since he didn't want to act sulky in front of someone else.

Ichikawa-san seemed to notice the notepad. "Well, I imagine that would be a little awkward, trying to hold a conversation on paper, but it is a very kind thought, Akira-kun. Maybe he just doesn't let himself get interested in partial efforts; a boy like that probably has a hard time with most people."

Akira frowned, then looked up at her in blank perplexity. "Partial efforts? What else is there if he can't talk, Ichikawa-san?"

She looked surprised, then like she was hiding a smile. "Oh, I always forget you don't know as much about everything as you do about Go. Deaf people use sign language, Akira-kun-speaking with their hands, as I understand it."

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Akira quickly discovered that there was no single standard form of sign language among regions, so after brief hesitation he chose to focus on the Tokyo one. He also discovered that there was more than one kind of sign language, and after more baffled stress settled on the air-writing kanji apparently most common for giving personal and place names. Akira had a quick memory; after a few days of studying shapes around his Go practice he felt confident he would be able to recognize any name the other boy gave him, and went back to his normal schedule with a pleased and relieved sigh.

Then it occurred to him that if the other boy signed anything other than his name Akira wouldn't be able to understand, and he was so irritatingly perverse he'd probably never make another sign again no matter what Akira tried. Saturday came far too quickly as he scrambled in every spare minute to juggle schoolwork, Go, and absurdly deficient sources for independently learning sign language. He felt tired and frazzled as he waited for the other boy and half undecided if he would try signing to him at all.

He didn't show up. Akira waited, played with Kitajima-san and a few of the other regulars, talked with Ichikawa-san, ran through three different high-level Go games and his entire sign lexicon in his head, and finally the eternally slowing clock on the wall showed only an hour to closing and still there wasn't the slightest hint of the other boy appearing. Akira went home stewing and threw himself into his computer and all the sites he'd bookmarked with sign language instructions. No longer was he concerned about not being to respond to any small random comments the other boy might feel moved to make. Now his entire motivation and concentration was set on being able to demand and understand an explanation from his rival next week. How could he care so little even about the *potential* of such challenging, equal games!

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-You didn't come last time,- Akira was able to form and execute that Saturday with a well-controlled balance of calm and accusation when the other boy strolled in as casually as he always had, hands in pockets until he reached Akira's table and pulled off his jacket.

He paused and regarded Akira with what might have been surprise, then shrugged, sat down-and signed back, -Got busy.-

Akira felt inexplicably disappointed by such a short answer even though he was relieved-he wouldn't even begin to fool himself by thinking he had even a decent vocabulary yet-but he'd hoped the explanation would be something more like "Something unexpected came up I couldn't get away from" or "Family emergency." Something that suggested Go was a little more important to him. But maybe he was just taking Akira's likely amateur experience into consideration; "Got busy" could be a simpler form of those reasons.

-I go to a lot of salons,- the boy continued, just slowly enough for Akira to follow, with an air of almost casual cruelty, -but since you're a decent opponent I try to remember this one.-

Akira blinked, keeping tight hold of his temper, honestly not sure how to react. Did the boy know how Akira felt about Go, about the heady

possibility of a real rival, that he chose to say that? Could he possibly care so little about playing when his skill was so great?

-Is that what matters to you in Go?- he finally asked, struggling a bit to find signs that fit and unable to be sure he was using them correctly. -Strong opponents?-

-What else is there?- the boy's reply came, swift and difficult. - Money?-

-Right,- Akira agreed, relieved. Of course the boy had to feel at least partly the same as he did; he was just brash and rude. Akira had forgotten.

The boy grabbed a handful of stones from the white pot. -Nigiri.-

That or "play." It was hard to find Go-specific words online or in the library books. But he filed that sign away coupled with that context, with possible meaning inferred. Hopefully he'd learn it more firmly in the future.

-Coming again next time?- Akira signed quickly several hours later when the boy stretched and made motions to leave.

He shrugged his jacket on before cocking his head and nodding. Akira realized he had almost forgotten the (second) most important question and reached out and grabbed the other boy's arm as he turned to go, then hastily formed, -What's your name?-

For an unbelievable moment he thought the boy might just walk away without telling him. Then he straightened his jacket sleeve and traced out, -Shindou Hikaru.-

Shindou Hikaru. Akira nodded and watched him leave, feeling plain relief at finally being able to attach any name to that face and game. It made him seem a little more human.

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Akira's sign language continued to improve, and Shindou's attitude continued to not; they progressed to arguing with heated expressions and gestures in after-play while maintaining the painfully well-mannered taking of turns to demonstrate their points. Akira found himself regularly baffled by the other boy's inexplicable lassitude; he kept failing to appear every now and then, usually with no explanation but "Yeah" or "Oh well," and the few times Akira got so annoyed by his ignorance or lack of interest in some aspect of the Go world besides their own games and tried to educate him, he was almost always cut off with an equally annoyed, -So what?-

He could play equal to Touya Akira, and he acted like it was just a hobby. Akira was eventually forced to simply accept it, and Shindou seemed to become a bit more easygoing, but he couldn't help but keep searching for something that would find him a spark of passion rather than just interest. A one-sided rivalry was hard to maintain.

-What's wrong?- Akira asked one day when Shindou came in dragging his feet and slumped down in his chair, resting his forehead on the goban. Asking required rapping the other boy's head and forming the signs almost directly under his nose to force him to be aware of the question. Sometimes Akira was surprised to realize just how much Shindou's convenient-result rudeness rubbed off on him when they were together.

Shindou sighed deeply as he dragged his head up and replied dispiritedly, -Got suspended from the soccer team, that's all; now I can't play for a month.-

Akira had yet to find a sign for "Er," and wished for one now while he thought for something to say. He was surprised to learn Shindou was on a soccer team, though he certainly looked more like he belonged on one than in front of a goban. But then he already knew Go was only a hobby for Shindou. Why shouldn't he have another, when being deaf probably didn't matter there either?

-Would you rather be at a ramen shop then?- he suggested tentatively, that being the extent of what he knew about the other

boy's preferences after several months of association.

-Shut up and play,- was his unencouraging reply. After only two somewhat lackluster games Shindou looked up at the clock, sighed, and signed, -Gotta go. My mom's going on about how I can spend so much more time on homework now with all this. See you next week.-

-Bye,- Akira signed, which was the same wave Shindou had given him the second time they met. -Good luck.-

It was a silly thing to add, but he couldn't think of anything else, and Shindou didn't see it anyway as he headed for the door. Akira tried, not for the first time, not to feel frustrated or envious that the other boy could play so well when he seemed to work for it so little-even if Akira won most of their games.

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Instead of coming the next Saturday, Shindou showed up in the middle of the week, luckily when Akira was already there, and peremptorily took over the time he usually spent teaching customers with nothing but a sighed, -So bored.- Thereafter he began appearing regularly twice a week. Akira couldn't mind playing him more often, but he did feel an obligation to his father's customers, so the second time Shindou came in on a Wednesday night he curtly gestured him away from sliding into the chair opposite and slyly suggested, -Since you're here, why don't you make up a bit of the fee you've been skipping and help me give teaching games?-

Shindou stopped and gave him a scowl that suggested he knew what Akira was trying to do. Part of a pro's job was to teach amateurs; he probably knew that much.

-Playing's one thing, teaching's another,- he signed back, his movements brusque. -How exactly do you think they'd manage to hang onto my every word as I spout pearls of wisdom?-

-We discussed perfectly fine in the beginning, just like we still do,- Akira returned calmly. -If you really need help I can translate.-

Shindou snorted, which was always a slightly jarring sound. -You have no idea.-

Akira ignored him, continuing to wait for a paying opponent. After a moment Shindou scowled again and sat down with a thump, beside rather than across from him. -I'll give advice if you tell them a dumb move, but I'm not teaching. With this much business you'll have to play me or fall asleep anyway.-

-I'll play you while we wait, we just have to keep the board open so we don't drive anyone away,- Akira signed with a flash of inspiration. He'd heard of blind Go before, but never thought it would be possible for someone who couldn't hear the placements instead of seeing them before now. Funny that the solution was to remove the goban.

-5-5.-

Shindou looked at him like he was crazy, then rolled his eyes, closed them briefly, and responded, -14-9.-

The game was much more difficult than their usual ones, since it was easier to picture the grid and stones with closed eyes but knowing the opponent's next move required opening them. Shindou won by an embarrassing margin when a customer came along and Akira had to divide his attention, then taunted him about it mercilessly. The customer, not one of the regulars, looked slightly offput by the silent communication even though Akira maintained a professional calm, but he was too involved in the evening to care if they lost the salon one man's occasional thousand yen. Even though he absolutely hated Shindou's deliberate casual insults to the game that he knew he only said to provoke him.

Then one evening an unfamiliar *woman*, which was quite rare in the Go world, appeared at the doorway of the salon as Akira and Shindou were playing and strode up behind the other boy, clapping a hand down on his shoulder. Akira started and Shindou jumped and spun around, and the signing that followed was like a silent explosion, too rapid for Akira to follow, an upbraiding conducted in mime until Shindou made a funny little sound in the middle of it, the

first Akira had ever heard from him besides a few associated with breathing, and the woman started scolding him with voice as well as hands.

"Please, Shindou-san, we were just playing," Akira stammered after he got over his first shock, daring to break in. He didn't actually know if she'd taken her husband's name upon marriage, but she was clearly Shindou's mother and he didn't know any other name for her, so he just hoped she wouldn't take offense. "Hikaru-san is very good at Go, very good, he could probably make a living at it if he wanted-

"My son is not helpless," the woman turned on him in a towering fury, looking offended indeed, "he will never rely on *games* for a living; he will learn to apply himself and improve himself and make something of himself and stop disappearing all over the city and never coming home and I will thank you not to tempt him further down that path, young man!"

Akira shrank back, bewildered and a little frightened, and the woman swept Shindou away with her, hunched and silent like a chastised child. It wasn't until several long empty seconds later that Akira slowly started to clear away their game and noticed she had left Shindou's jacket, but he entertained no thought of trying to go after her and return it. He took it home with him instead, hoping an opportunity would somehow come to give it back in person.

## Chapter 2

A/N: Here's the second of three parts. Bit of a soapbox in the middle for a moment; I honestly can't remember why since I've never known any deaf person... but I'll leave it anyway. If I don't die before then I'll try to remember to post the end tomorrow night. (For all you Super Bowl fans who *flooded* the deli earlier to snap up our sale items and kept me standing at a counter for *seven solid hours* saucing spare ribs for you... you're welcome. If you show up again tomorrow en even larger masse I will hate you.)

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The following Saturday, while Akira recreated a random game and tried to feel relaxed, Shindou edged in, looking around warily, and slipped into the seat across from him. -Not staying, - he signed before Akira could react. -Not coming anymore now my mom knows it. -

Akira swallowed and handed him his jacket, which he accepted with a quick nod of thanks, and tried to think. -Why don't we both go to a different salon then? -

That didn't sound quite as needy as saying he didn't want to have stop playing him, or as scared as saying he didn't want to be around either if that meant Shindou's mother was going to come looking for him again-though that was absolutely true.

Shindou looked surprised, then considering. -Sure. Good idea. -

Shindou had mentioned before that he went to "a lot" of different salons, but Akira found himself surprised at just how many he seemed to know of, most of them with at least a few people inside that seemed to know him. Akira had always had the impression that even insei only went to a few to practice, but then, Shindou wouldn't even consider becoming an insei.

He resolved, as usual, to put that whole matter out of his mind and just play. Coming out smelling like cigarette smoke was a small price to pay for being able to continue doing that, and gave him a faint clue as to why Shindou's mother might have been so worked up about her son's choice of activities.

-Have you ever tried just explaining to your parents?- Akira asked tentatively one Saturday as they rode the train to yet another destination he had no idea of. -Wouldn't they be proud you're so good?-

Shindou snorted. -I'm deaf.- It was the first time he had ever actually mentioned it himself. -I'm seriously disadvantaged; they're going to make me make up for that if it kills them. Maybe if I'd been a little baby putting down the pretty stones while everyone gasped and stared they'd believe this was worth it, but I practically taught myself the last few years.- Akira barely managed not to gape. -And if they did believe it was worth it, they'd push me so hard to become the best that I'd take every chance I got to get away from it. I like to do my own things.-

Akira just nodded dumbly. That was the most Shindou had ever told him about himself, even if it was absolutely unbelievable-considering Akira had been a little baby putting down the pretty stones (though, granted, his father was one of the greatest title holders in Japan and had personally taught him since he was two), and it had taken him this long to reach his current level of skill. And Shindou did so in a few years, practically *teaching himself* ? That was *not* possible. It went against his entire knowledge of and belief in Go. He desperately wanted to say so, to ream Shindou out for trying to pass off such boasting, but he knew if he did Shindou would just go cool and closed off and probably never show up again, and even if it was only a hobby to him Akira had to keep playing him, until he had surpassed him. So he struggled, fiercely, for a hard moment, and finally deflated with a long, slow sigh, pushing everything Shindou had said to the back of his mind and burying it there, though it lingered under a small sore spot he couldn't gloss over.

-Jerk,- he only signed, the movement small and brief.

-Go snob,- Shindou returned, perfectly normally.

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-What's the matter?- Akira asked worriedly as soon as he saw the other boy's posture as he came into view, vaguely noticing how signing was better over distance as opposed to shouting.

-Allowance got cut off,- Shindou signed back, his expression bitter. - No more Go. I'm not mooching off you for that much.-

Akira blinked, stunned at such a drastic restriction. He tried to understand Shindou's situation, but he simply couldn't reconcile parents that could so violently oppose such a talent with only his own to provide his personal experience, so he simply didn't let himself think about it.

-For how long?- he asked.

-Who knows.- Shindou's motions were savage. -Down to kicking a ball against a wall I guess, until I break it or my foot.-

-Don't be stupid,- Akira signed quickly, alarmed, and that produced an idea. -I've got a goban in my room we could play on, if you don't mind only borrowing the train fare. I'll keep a note so you can pay me back whenever you earn anything again.-

Shindou's expression screwed up in reluctance. -I dunno.-

Akira wanted to urge him, but he could see that answer was only a placeholder while he tried to form his real one, so he waited, keeping his hands still despite his impatience.

-Guess since I've got nothing else to do right now,- the other boy finally begrudging. -Is it far?-

-Not really. Come on.-

He tried not to feel self-conscious when Shindou stared at his house as they entered, but couldn't help feeling a little uncomfortable considering the other boy's current problems when they ran into his mother and he introduced them, having to remember to speak and sign at the same time, "Mother, this is my friend who came to play Go-um, he's deaf; Shindou, this is my mother Akiko-san."

Shindou bowed politely to her without signing anything, and Akira's mother covered any surprise and smiled at him warmly before glancing to her son. "Well, tell him he's welcome, dear. Let me know if either of you get hungry and I'll have tea ready, unless you're both too wrapped up to notice."

"Ah, thanks," Akira said blankly, realizing that he'd never brought anyone over to play Go before, or to do anything else, and retreated hastily with Shindou to his room to cover his confusion. Shindou said nothing at all but focused solely on their game.

Later when he emerged to see if his mother would provide those snacks after all, he noticed his father reviewing a game in the Go room and paused at the doorway on impulse to ask, "Would you mind if my friend came to the study group tomorrow?"

His father looked up at him. "The one you used to play so often in the salon?"

"Uh-huh."

"Very well. Make sure he knows the time."

Akira nodded and went back to his room, relieved and pleased, and told Shindou, who looked dubious.

-What's a study group for anyway?- he signed.

-For studying Go,- Akira returned, surprised at his ignorance and perplexed at how to explain the obvious. -Recreating and discussing

other people's games, or old games-sharing opinions, expertise, learning new perspectives.-

-Huh,- was all Shindou signed-not really a sign at all, just an abortive motion-and then went back to their game.

He showed up in front of their house the next morning at the proper time, though, even though Akira had forgotten to lend him any yen to get there, and followed him in silently with his hands buried in his jacket pockets and his shoulders hunched slightly. He didn't make a sign even when they slipped into the room and settled against the wall so as not to interrupt the adults already there, even though Akira had half expected him to comment that they were all funny-looking or something. Maybe he didn't recognize them as pros.

The adults' casual conversation about some of the Honinbou competitors ended as Ashiara-san, the last to arrive, entered, and blinked in surprise after he looked at Akira's empty usual spot closer to the goban in the middle of the room and then noticed his new one.

"This is my friend, Shindou Hikaru-san," Akira introduced quickly, feeling awkward. "We've been playing at the salon."

All the adults but Ogata-san nodded politely (Ogata-san rarely bothered to be polite), which Shindou barely returned, and then they brought out the pots of stones for recreating games or merely debating hands or formations. Akira had to pull Shindou closer to his usual spot so they could see, slightly exasperated by the other boy for having put him on the spot with attention-even though of course he couldn't help it-when he was used to being a quiet but nearly seamless member of the group.

His father began by bringing up one of the games they had mentioned in the Honinbou tournament, and he and Ashiara-san took the places at the goban to lay out the original placement of both sides' stones. Then Ogata-san made the first critique, and Akira remembered he had to translate for Shindou. He had first realized he still wasn't as proficient in sign language as he thought when

Shindou's mother invaded the Go salon and utterly lost him in her speed and force, and he'd applied himself with greater intensity after that to make up the lack, but he still found it challenging now to have to sign at someone else's speaking rate with as near to their vocabulary as he could manage. It kept him too involved to participate himself for the first few minutes; he was distractedly glad that Shindou wasn't trying to contribute to the discussion either.

"You see, if white had gone here instead, it would have sealed that corner of the board—" Ashiwara-san pointed out.

"And left the right open to black moving here," Ogata-san interrupted. "Take that star—"

Akira messed up a sign from trying to increase his speed relating the others' words while he could remember them all just as Shindou started to respond for the first time. "Please slow down please, I can't keep up," he protested to the adults, flustered, then grew even more flustered as everyone stopped and stared at him and he realized he ought to translate what he had just said too so Shindou would understand.

Shindou, beside him, didn't look any happier at all the attention either, but set his jaw and ignored all their gazes, shoving Akira with his elbow when he inadvertently stopped. Akira quickly finished Ogata-san's comment, trying to regain his composure.

"Your friend is deaf, Akira-kun?" Ashiwara-san said, looking surprised.

"How can he communicate with any other players, then?" Ogata-san asked, with impersonal scrutiny.

Akira flushed for his friend as he relayed that too after an instantaneous hesitation over whether he should edit it to be polite or not, reluctant but fairly certain that Shindou wouldn't appreciate him doing so. "Easily," he defended him, also translating that, knowing

that Shindou would probably be offended now since he didn't know Ogata-san was usually like that. "And he has something to add."

He started to turn back to let Shindou repeat whatever he had started to sign and relay it to the others, but the other boy instead leaned forward, his expression set, and moved one stone up a space with a sharp *pachi!* before rapidly changing the layout in turns to reflect the obvious difference in conclusion. He waited a moment once he finished, letting them all stare, then swiftly in exact reverse order put them back where they had all been before and sat back again, chin raised a little.

"I see," Aшивара-сан said, blinking, glancing to Akira. "That's a good eye."

Akira translated, pleased for him at the compliment. Shindou just shrugged one shoulder.

"I would say you communicate with other players very effectively, Shindou-san," his father said, looking at his friend and bowing his head slightly to him. "Please feel free to contribute anything else you notice."

Akira translated that too, and it startled a small, shy smile out of the other boy-hardly there before it was gone, but the first such expression Akira realized he had ever seen on him.

The debate resumed, slowly at first and then quickly picking up back to speed again, except this time with the adults seeming mostly conscious of taking turns speaking, and keeping an eye out for Shindou's physical interjections. Akira mostly concentrated on interpreting, pleased with his increasing fluidity as he adjusted to it, and thinking with some surprise of how little he had really thought about sign language even though he had learned it and used it with Shindou. No wonder the other boy had scoffed when he first offered to translate for teaching games, and been reluctant to try to communicate with him before he had learned to sign.

It was so easy to be rude without even realizing, but he bet Shindou was acutely aware of it every time-even he himself, after he already learned it, still forgot to translate his own words when he was speaking to someone else in front of Shindou sometimes, and nearly altered the only means he had of knowing what was going on in a group he was supposed to be a part of, and might have done the same as Ashiara-san and looked at the interpreter instead of the one he was really speaking to. It made him feel even prouder of his father, for not having done that, and resolve to pay much closer attention to everything that went on around himself and Shindou in the future. He really still had hardly any idea of what Shindou went through by being deaf.

-Father meant it when he said please feel free to come again,- he felt moved to assure him at the end of the session, as the adults lingered for more idle conversation and he accompanied Shindou to the entrance to retrieve his shoes. -Did you enjoy it?-

Shindou shrugged, possibly adjusting his jacket. -I guess. Those guys were better than I expected.-

Akira wondered if he meant Go-wise (did he still not know they were pros?), or, with his newly realized sensitivity, if he meant deaf-wise, but decided not to ask.

-Maybe next time we can play afterward,- he signed instead. -Do you think you can manage to get here sometimes?-

-Not very often,- Shindou responded, negative but not actually negating. -I'll try once in a while so we can play, I guess. You ever not at the salon, though?-

-Every evening, after eight or so,- Akira answered honestly, wavering on whether or not to choose a more convenient time and make it true in the future. -Weeknights usually earlier-except Wednesdays. No, including Wednesdays-I don't like to stay that late at the salon then anymore.-

That struck him as slightly impolite, to infer that it was because of Shindou's mother's visit, but that was true too and no other reason would sound convincing since they had played together on that night at the salon before. Shindou didn't show any expression in reaction at all as he finished lacing up his shoes, but that seemed typical for him. His only goodbye was the brief hand wave and a careless, -See you around.-

Akira didn't respond because, again, Shindou already had his back to him and wouldn't know. He sighed as he closed the door after watching Shindou out the gate, going back to the Go room to wish the other study group members well on their way as he always did.

"Shindou-san seemed very skillful," his father commented to him after Ashiwara-san, the last to leave as he was the last to arrive, was gone. "Lacking a certain spark, though. Where did he learn to play?"

"He said he basically taught himself," Akira replied softly, glad to share his troubles on the subject of his friend for the first time, avoiding the boast of how quickly Shindou had done so now that he felt he knew a little more about him. "His parents don't seem to want him to have anything to do with Go."

His father only frowned, but he felt his surprise. Touya Kouyo's life was Go just as Akira's was, but he was older, more experienced; maybe he could help Akira understand how anyone could be that... close-minded. Unkind. Akira had never thought about it before, but if he had ever found something he truly enjoyed doing besides Go, he was fairly certain his parents would have let him pursue it even if they personally disapproved. Why wouldn't everyone?

"That's a shame," was all his father said, though. "I'd like to evaluate his skill if there ever comes an opportunity to do so."

Maybe if he comes to play me again, Akira thought, but for some reason kept from saying so. He didn't want to make any even such loose promises for such an unpredictable boy as Shindou.

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With Shindou no longer coming by the Go salon, or even any of the other Go salons, it was more than two weeks before Akira saw him again, during which time he knew he went slightly crazy trying to come up with ways to let Shindou be able to participate in the Go world again. The result came out unfortunately near a harangue when they finally met again.

At first, though, Akira was entirely dumb, because Shindou reappeared by showing up at his front door without any warning one Monday night close on ten o'clock. -You said late, didn't you?- was all he pointed out brusquely as Akira stepped aside for him and he kicked off his shoes. -So, you want to play or not?-

Akira came back to himself at the end of their game, wherein Shindou's play had been even hastier and rougher than usual and he lost badly, and without any warning of his own launched into an impassioned exhortation of the only conclusion he had come to. -You really need to practice more at this rate; why don't you tell your parents you just want to take the pro test, once, and if you fail it you'll never give them any trouble again? And if you pass you'll have your future set, you'll be able to support yourself pretty quickly and they won't possibly be able to worry with that proof, you see?-

-So I've gotten a little rusty; I don't have my own goban anymore,- Shindou signed savagely. -And how many times do I have to tell you I don't care about that stupid test? This is just a stupid game; I'd rather wither in some windowless office than be the freak charity case for some stupid Go maniacs anyway. You going to play again or should I even have bothered coming?-

-If you don't like playing, then don't!- Akira signed back, stung by such an uncalled-for reaction and too exasperated to be patient or tolerant any longer. -What's the matter with you, anyway, that you always insist you don't care but keep coming back? Some people devote their *lives* to Go, you know, and your attitude is an insult to all of them! They work for their skill, sweat for it, bleed for it! You should just stop playing at all if you won't give the game the respect it deserves!-

There was a moment of heavy silence, both of them glaring at one another, breathing a little harder than normal, Akira at least a little taken aback by his own outburst-though not sorry-and uncertain what to do next.

-Good grief,- Shindou finally signed, with a strangely quizzical expression. -You really mean it, don't you? You all really mean it.-

-Of course we do,- Akira retorted angrily, digging his position even firmer now that he had finally expressed it. -Why don't you? How can you possibly not when you're so good?-

-That's not really like you think,- Shindou signed, then looked at him and added abruptly, -You didn't believe me when I told you I only learned in the last few years, did you?-

Akira struggled for a moment over how to respond to that, with a further venting of his long-pent-up frustration or with an attempt toward reconciliation. -Do you even understand how impossible that is?-

Shindou kept looking at him for a moment, then shrugged and straightened. -Doesn't matter. Just forget it. Believe whatever you want. You want to play again or not now?-

-Fine.- Akira sighed, finding his ire drained away when he tested the vent after its brief release. -Let's just play.-

Shindou did better that time, putting more thought into his moves, reading ahead more accurately, but Akira was still acutely aware of the same thing he had noticed when he first met him, the same as his father had-there was still no spark of passion in his playing, no evidence of love for the game. Why did Shindou play? Akira wondered for the first time. Even with an incredible innate talent, why would he choose a game like Go for a hobby, and seek out stronger opponents even though he insisted he didn't care?

But he didn't seek out stronger opponents, Akira suddenly realized. He'd found one near-equal opponent, and that seemed to be enough; anything anyone enjoyed, even as a hobby, was always more enjoyable with even just one equal opponent; that was why Akira still wanted to play him too. It was just so hard for Akira to recognize that because it was so hard for him to be able to look at Go as something casual, occasional-like Shindou.

It troubled him, after that difficult new understanding, to realize that Shindou had yet to have ever been able to consider it the way he did.

-So you gonna take that test this year?- Shindou asked as he casually placed a stone to begin a new game, still without his usual defensive attitude of disinterest. -Even I've noticed most people think you should have already, you know.-

-Maybe,- Akira returned, flushing a little. He didn't want to say that he hadn't last year first because he'd wanted to surpass his rival, Shindou, and then because he'd hoped to be able to pull Shindou with him. -I don't care what other people think I should do.-

-You should get on with it if you're going to at all,- Shindou advised calmly. -You won't get any better if you kick your feet in stagnant water forever, and that's what you want, to get to the top. I probably never will now. Even if I ever changed my mind at some point in the future, I wouldn't want to come in someplace where I'd be at the bottom with you way above me, but if you waited around for me and I did actually change my mind we'd both have wasted years instead of just one of us and we'd probably never make a difference, and if I don't change my mind you'd probably have wasted your entire career. You better think about it without being nice.-

-I'll have you know my career isn't about considering you,- Akira retorted, without real heat. -Big ego you have there.-

Shindou flashed him a grin, brilliant in its unexpectedness. -About time you notice. Seriously--

-Shut up,- Akira signed, for the first time in his life. -Yeah, I'll probably take the test this year. Play.-

-Good.-

There was several moments of joint focus on the board as they placed stones, and then Shindou signed, -Stupid move, Go-pro.-

-So you think now, permanent-amateur!- Akira returned, flicking out the shapes quickly and decisively. -If you ever want to challenge me again, you'd better have put in the work to become my equal!-

-Big words, no backup,- Shindou decreed. -Watch that formation, hotshot.-

-Just keep watching there where I *want* you to.-

"Goodnight, Akira," his mother called from elsewhere in the house.

"Night!" Akira called back, not even registering it.

-So you think. I was nice enough to give warning because it's about to disappear.-

-Then you better watch that last hand, it's not lasting long.-

-Perfect.-

-Excuse me? What's that supposed to mean?-

-You're so shortsighted.-

- *Me* shortsighted? What kind of stupid move was that putting a stone *there* ?-

-The kind that turns into genius, no-pro.-

-I'll show you genius!-

"Goodnight, Akira," his father said from the doorway. "Shindou-san?"

Akira looked up, startled, and Shindou followed.

"Father?" Akira said blankly.

"It's quite late," he said, deceptively mildly. "I don't think we were aware you were visiting, Shindou-san."

Akira translated, still trying to gather his thoughts back from the duel on the goban. Shindou blinked several times, as if he was having the same trouble, before signing, -Sorry.- Akira translated that back.

"How far away do you live?" his father asked.

-Not really that far,- was Shindou's slightly evasive answer. -Can't we just finish this one game, Touya-sama?-

Akira was slightly surprised by the request when he glanced at his clock-it really had gotten quite late. Wasn't Shindou planning to go home at all for the night?

"It will be there next time," his father said, unmoving but not unkind. Akira relayed, and Shindou reluctantly brought his feet together under him and rose, grabbing his jacket from Akira's floor beside the goban with a careless swipe and jamming his arms into it.

"I think it will be best if I escort you home."

Shindou's expression was distinctly unwilling, but he signed nothing more as he moved toward the doorway where Touya Kouyo stood waiting. Akira felt inexplicably anxious looking at his reaction compared to how relaxed he had been just a moment before, the most relaxed Akira had ever seen him, and considering the little he knew about Shindou's parents. Maybe he really had been hoping to stay all night.

-Don't look so much like a scared puppy, no-pro,- Shindou signed as he left. -If we play again it'll be when I know I can beat you.-

-That'll be a long time then, amateur!- Akira signed back with asperity, trying to at least pretend to regain the carefree attitude they had both been interacting with until his father's interruption.

The other boy made a final abbreviated sign as he disappeared into the hall, followed by Touya Kouyo, that Akira determined after a second was probably -Yeah;- then he realized that Shindou had used *if*, not *when*, and for a moment the anxiety struck again with full force. Why would he agree to a meaningless taunt? Why did that boy always have to be so infuriatingly perverse?

After a moment Akira rose to his feet and located a blank sheet of kifu paper, then sat back down to copy the unfinished game so they could start again from the same place even if he used the goban before then. He determinedly pushed all worries out of his mind while doing so-what Shindou did, Shindou did; Akira would just play Go.

A few weeks after turning up at Akira's house Shindou disappeared, run away from home, and didn't turn up again.

## Chapter 3

A/N: Since it's a bit hard browsing for such specifics in the beta section, anyone here who knows something about strokes want to beta a second old already complete HnG story I've unearthed? I'm a bit dubious about its realism without a second more knowledgeable opinion. (The story involves Sai as a real person in a nursing home and a very young Hikaru becoming friends with and learning to play Go from him.)

I wrote this some undetermined amount of time after the first two parts, so I hope it still flows well and ties everything up decently. Let me know if it doesn't and I can at least explain what I intended to communicate.

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"Of course the Koreans keep us waiting," Kansai Institute pro Yashiro-san grumbled, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets. "The Chinese don't have to go through this."

"You were late coming down," seventeen-year-old Akira pointed out mildly.

"Your patience is not natural," Yashiro grunted. "My bet is on you being a reincarnation of a hundred-year-old Go world sensei."

Akira just gave a slight shrug, disregarding the pronouncement. "I've had reason to learn it."

"You going to beat Ko Yeongha this time?"

Akira had been pleased to meet Yashiro two years before when the eighteen-and-younger pros competed to see who would be one of the three representatives for Japan for the new Hokuto Cup. He had immense talent and his style of play was unconventional; he also had a lack of interest in courtesy and his parents strongly

disapproved of his choice of career. But he didn't quite have the skill to pull off some of the hands he tried, he had a lack of interest in anything but Go, and he was still persevering in trying to force his parents to acknowledge his chosen career. Akira and Yashiro got along well enough, but they weren't what either of them would call friends.

"We won't know until we've played," Akira said. "I've improved over the last two years, but I'm sure he has too, of course."

One of the Go reporters waiting for the Korean team's arrival apparently picked up his comment and turned toward the two players. "Touya-san? Are you looking forward to facing Ko Yeongha-san again?"

Akira bowed his head to him in acknowledgment. "Of course. I anticipate every match I play, but foreign pros are particularly exhilarating since their styles are often unfamiliar to me."

The reporter smiled, but before he could ask anything else the doors of the hotel lobby swished open and a small crowd entered of more press, spectators, and the Korean delegation. The reporters immediately converged on the new arrivals as they continued forward to meet the waiting Japanese; Akira thought absently that the tournament's sponsors must be very pleased at the increase in interest since the first Cup two years before. It would probably become an official semiannual event if its popularity continued to grow by such an increment.

Officially, the Japanese and Korean teams then greeted one another, but there were still so many other people bustling around that Akira had only the vaguest impression of who exactly the Korean members were-Ko Yeongha was one, of course, but he seemed content to hang back with the Korean reporters saying nothing, presumably merely listening. To Akira's ears all the chatter blurred together into a background hum, the Japanese he understood naturally and the Korean that for the most part was sound interspersed with catchable words or phrases. As far as Akira knew

he was the only potential representative for Japan's team who had bothered to learn some Chinese and Korean before the first Hokuto Cup, and continued the study when it became likely that the Cup would be repeated. He hadn't intended to do any more than learn a few simple greetings, just for the sake of politeness. He had changed his mind when he happened to discover that the Chinese and Korean sign languages shared traits with Japans'.

Japanese sign language was something his hands still knew as surely as the feeling of Go stones, even though he hadn't used it in almost four years.

He hadn't learned any of the other countries' sign languages, of course; there was no reason-but the memory of the difference fluency made once had prompted him to study enough to be able to hold conversations and understand reasonably reliably if the other spoke carefully enough. It gave him a feeling of accomplishment as well as being polite to be able to communicate with his country's guests.

"... And you barely made the age limit this year, correct?" a Japanese reporter near Akira cut through his inattention, echoed rapidly by a Korean interpreter. Akira directed his attention to him with a quick blink since he couldn't tell if he was the person being addressed. "There's a lot of discussion going on about this final match between you and Touya Akira-san."

For a moment Akira thought Ko Yeonha wasn't going to bother replying-he had seemed to have a tendency toward deliberate provocation in the last tournament two years before-but then he heard the vaguely familiar Korean drawl, promptly overlaid by the interpreter, while the background buzz continued unabated. Akira was probably the only person besides the interpreter and Koreans who could understand that single unhurried thread of voice. And he was only human; there was no reason not to listen to a public conversation concerning himself.

"That's already out of date in Korea," said his nominal rival in a tone that to Akira sounded both condescending and amused. "There's more speculation over there about the future of Japan's pro world right now."

That explained the condescension, then-Akira did not have to be told that on an international level Japan's pros were considered rather poor-but not the amusement.

"Why?" the Japanese reporter asked, honestly bewildered, undoubtedly with the same knowledge. "I mean, what would cause the Koreans to take an interest in Japan so suddenly?"

Akira noticed that now the interpreter-a Korean-also carried an undertone of humor as he translated.

"Why not?" Ko Yeongha returned maddeningly casually. "I would think one of our team members switching to your country after this tournament would be of interest to both."

"Really? Why would one of you do that?" the Japanese reporter asked quickly, with professional or unprofessional excitement.

The reporter was the one Akira had been idly watching as the informal interview went on, but finally the crowd shifted enough that Ko Yeongha came into his peripheral vision beside the interpreter, just as his shoulders lifted in a negligent shrug. His expression confirmed all the inflections of his voice.

"Why not?" he repeated. "When he came from here in the first place." Without even looking behind him he reached back and clapped another figure on the shoulder, not bothering to pull him forward as the reporter focused in like a hawk. Only vaguely did Akira's mind process and register the Korean's uninterpreted, obviously familiar scoff, "Shy as a girl," because, his attention so attracted, he automatically took a step to the side to bring the other competitor into view between animated heads. Then he stared as

intently and meaningfully as he ever had in his life since there was no point in calling for the other's attention.

Shindou Hikaru felt it, unsurprisingly considering his old sensitivity to other people's attention, and raised his head slightly and met Akira's gaze. It seemed irrationally strange that he should look so different now when Akira finally saw him again-taller, lankier, less unformed with baby fat even though his bangs were still bleached and his posture was still a casual slump-strange even though intellectually Akira knew that he himself must look at least as different compared to four years ago too. He also felt surprisingly calm considering the suddenness of the encounter-just as Shindou looked entirely unsurprised.

Of course, if Shindou was somehow (how?) on the Korean team, he would be aware that Akira was on Japan's again.

With the absolute confidence of not even consciously doing so Akira raised his hands and formed, not quite as deftly as before after so long out of practice and with utter disregard for the people remaining between them, -Any explanation to give?-

Shindou glanced away for a second, jiggling his shoulders a little and putting on a not-very-sincere innocent expression, and signed back, -What, no hello?-

It struck Akira, after the memorable last meeting he had ever had with his childhood rival, that that previously sullen, self-contained barely-teenager now looked remarkably assured and at ease with himself.

-No,- he signed, precisely and unhesitatingly. -You skip goodbye, I skip hello. Are you going to ask if it's a pleasant surprise to see you again?-

-Don't think so,- Shindou returned, with a previously uncharacteristic grin. -Are you going to ask me what I'm doing here?-

-That's obvious,- Akira decreed with some asperity. How easy it was to fall back into familiar patterns with a boy who could well be a perfect stranger now. He had never been so... typical-teenager-ish... with anyone else. -I will, however, ask what you're doing on the Korean team.-

-Decided I felt like playing you again,- Shindou signed nonchalantly. - You remember what I told you, right, that I wasn't ever going to come in at the bottom of a ring where you were already on top? Well I had to come up with some way to make sure everyone understands we're really equals when I'm stuck with that.-

Several replies immediately crowded into Akira's head, all with equal urgency, so that he had to sort through and prioritize them despite the slightly surreal casualness of the entire reunion that suggested order didn't really matter. -So you pick a way that involves briefly making yourself as famous as me as well as associated with me,- he chose dryly after only a brief pause. -That actually seems well thought out. Are you really the same Shindou?-

-Now brilliant on and off the Go board,- came the lofty, breezy return.  
-Hope you're prepared for a real rival.-

Akira felt a slow, small smile growing on his face, unusual in its spontaneity. -Jerk.-

Shindou grinned-a free, easy grin. He was definitely no longer the near-delinquent runaway. -Go snob.-

-You too now,- Akira pointed out, slightly childishly, slightly still unbelieving. -You're really going to become a pro?-

When Shindou merely shrugged, he tilted his head and regarded him for a moment, simply puzzling. -What changed?-

Again Shindou merely twitched a shoulder in answer, but though deflecting he still wasn't as closed off or defensive as he used to be.

Despite their long separation Akira thought he could safely press him for the answers he was going to get eventually.

-Why don't we start with how you ended up in Korea?-

Shindou's hands started to move; then he glanced off to the side and Akira became aware that the Korean interpreter was regarding them both with a surprised frown while he absently continued to mediate for the Japanese reporter. Shindou signed something to him briefly in what must have been Korean sign language, then turned dismissively back to Akira and suggested, -Help me check in and find my room and we can talk there, yeah?-

Akira quickly moved to do so, though now that he was no longer solely focused on Shindou he was also aware of the mild interest the two teens stirred in the remaining group as they departed the lobby together. But Akira was the Japanese member who had studied Korean for the sake of being able to converse with the visitors, and Shindou had picked up a duffel bag so he was obviously just getting help getting settled as he'd requested, and anyway Akira didn't care what anyone thought. Alone and private in Shindou's hotel room, they continued almost as if there had been no interruption.

-Didn't wind up in Korea on purpose,- Shindou started with a distantly thoughtful expression, a detachment from his explanation that Akira was glad to see compared to before even as it made him more curious as to such a change. -Well, not really. Then I had nothing I could do except Go when I was there, and decided I'd have to do it to get by-but they really are a lot higher than our Go salons and amateur tournaments and stuff. Had to be something really, really special to make it-so I was.-

His expression was still distant, only vaguely aware of his audience, with a strange mixture of remembered fondness and sadness that was almost embarrassing to be observing, it seemed so personal. But a trace of a smile emphasized it, and made it a little lighter, before Akira could come up with any reaction.

-The others will probably tell you I've gotten worse since then if you ask, though a lot better since you and I last played. But that's that; won't ever be again... I'm on your level now, I know I am. You're not going to beat me this time..-

-I'll go tell Kurata-san to put me on second board,- Akira signed without any hesitation, despite the inevitable upset such a demand would cause among the Japanese Go public, when he was their strongest player in the Cup and they wanted to make up for their previous loss.

-If you really want a rematch with Ko Yeonha that badly,- Shindou signed, with a casually innocent expression that, when Akira stared at him, broke into amusement and faint condescension. -I told you I'm your level now.-

-I didn't beat Ko Yeonha last time!- Akira protested, too incredulous to be polite.

-He gave me reason,- Shindou signed with a suddenly flat expression, then lifted one eyebrow deliberately with a complete change back to his new easygoing attitude. -And you'd beat him this time, wouldn't you?-

The answer he'd give anyone else, the one he had given everyone else, was of course a polite neither yea nor nay. With Shindou he answered without even thinking about it, -Yes.-

Shindou looked satisfied. -So there.-

Akira shook his head, abruptly wryly amused. -You've grown up, but you haven't really changed.-

-Neither have you,- Shindou challenged. -I'll bet you could still bring out that last game we didn't finish, couldn't you?-

Deliberately Akira did not think about where in his room he probably still had that kifu stored.

-I'm not going to,- he chose to answer, not admitting or denying it. - Since we're about to have a new game tomorrow.-

Shindou made a face that suggested he hadn't actually grown up much except for discarding his defensive shell. It occurred to Akira that he still didn't know how or why that had happened, and might not ever know. That seemed a little personal between such newly rejoined, distantly casual friends as they were-and, anyway, not something Shindou was likely to tell him even now. Four years had been quite enough time to realize that he had never really known anything about Shindou Hikaru except his Go.

-Ah, not today?- was what Shindou complained. -I already had to study those Chinese brats. They'll just be boring.-

-Go is never boring,- Akira reproved. -You truly must have matured. Studying opponents? So serious now.-

Shindou made another, deeper face. -Slave drivers, those foreigners. Why do you think I want to come back to Japan?-

Then he straightened and swung off the bed he had been lounging on, grabbing up his jacket with the kind of casual sweep that was still familiar even as he signed, -I'm hungry. Let's go for ramen.-

-I'm surprised you survived in Korea without it,- Akira mocked lightly, marveling somewhere inside that they seemed to be such perfect friends after so sudden a separation and reunion-much friendlier than ever before except for that last meeting. Was this the kind of relationship they would have developed after that last game if Shindou had stayed around instead of disappearing?

Probably not, he reminded himself, considering the evident strain with his parents. Did Shindou intend to reunite with them too now that he was back on Japanese soil? After running away to an entirely different country...

Unexpectedly the idea popped into Akira's head of renting his own apartment and extending the offer of becoming roommates. They were both seventeen, after all; Akira was making more than enough to live on his own if he decided to, and Shindou would also as he rose through the ranks of the pros if he was willing to take on the supplementary duties like teaching. Was this new Shindou different enough to accept that, even with the undeniable handicap of his disability?

-You know,- he found himself signing before he consciously thought about it, -I expect my father will want to play you now when he hears you're back.-

The look Shindou gave him was pure incredulity. -Touya-sama? The *Meijin* ? All he knows is back when I was a brat playing with you!-

He said you had skill, Akira started to sign, and then stopped as he recalled the other part of that comment, that Shindou had also lacked fire. Suddenly he wanted badly to ask-had he found that, finally? He was planning to enter the pro world when he had sworn he never would-was it only because he "had nothing to do but Go" or because he wanted nothing else but Go?

-Yes, the *Meijin*,- was all he wound up signing, mildly. -The ex-*Meijin*. He's retired.-

Shindou blinked. -How come?-

-He had a heart attack a couple years ago.- The intervening time and his father's continued good health afterward let Akira explain with a calmness that was a far cry from what he had experienced when it happened. -It wasn't too major. But he decided to start slowing down, taking things easier. He still plays Go constantly, of course. He says he's much happier since he decided to retire.-

-Good grief,- Shindou signed, looking vaguely dazed. -But he'd want to play me?-

-Well, he did then,- Akira signed a little less patiently. -I never got a chance to mention it to you before.-

The bleach-banged teen seemed entirely unconscious of the subtle reference to the lack of any warning or goodbye before he vanished. Then again, Shindou had never noticed subtlety.

-Well-- but he stopped without finishing and then signed abruptly, - Well, guess we'll just see now; are we going to eat or not? I want ramen!-

Akira suppressed the desire to remind him that patience was a virtue and simply followed along in his search for the nearest ramen shop. The question of Shindou's motivation for playing still lingered in his mind now that it had occurred to him, but he harnessed all his long-cultivated patience and let the question lie resting until something should come up that would answer it one way or the other. They would play tomorrow. After four years, that was soon enough.

He told himself that this new casual Shindou who had somehow managed to shed the burdens of his past was not likely to have kept only the focus for the game that he had once displayed. But he had improved enough to be accepted onto the Korean team-and first board, even above the celebrated prodigy Ko Yeongha-improved, and unimproved, if his brief undetailed explanation was to be believed. How had Ko Yeongha managed to "give him a reason" to beat him; what hidden point had he managed to find to spark the drive that was surely necessary for such an accomplishment? Was it a drive that only lasted for that purpose, just as Shindou had never exhibited any interest in finding any opponents better than Akira when they were younger?

He told himself not to be disappointed if passion like his own did not appear in his and Shindou's game tomorrow. The evidence was not encouraging. And he had not been in the habit of hoping anything about a game since as long as he could remember-anticipating, yes, but here he didn't have enough information to accurately anticipate

anything. Shindou would either fulfill his prediction of beating him or not.

He knew he was hoping anyway, despite all his good sense telling him otherwise. Shindou's reappearance and intention to play was already one miracle; how could he not hope for the other one on top of it that would make the metamorphosis complete? Even though really it wasn't fair to Shindou to be piling his own expectations and desires on him.

-You're totally out of it,- Shindou signed directly in front of his face, much to his surprise. -If you don't say no I'm going to dump your ramen on your head, okay? And then laugh. Hold still.-

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They took their seats the next day across the board from one another, and Akira couldn't help glancing up at Shindou's face as the commentator ran through the preliminary explanations for spectators before the matches began. The blond-banged teen didn't even seem to notice; his expression was already set, focused on the board, as if he were already playing through endless rounds of possible hands. Akira felt a small spark of hope in his chest but suppressed it by sharpening his focus, narrowing his view and concentration down to the bare nineteen-by-nineteen black lines on wood, his personal universe and battlefield.

The game began, with Shindou winning black and therefore the right to go first, and he spent ten minutes on that opening hand just sitting staring at the empty board with a shale stone between his fingers before finally placing it. Akira wondered what that might signify and what was going through his head, but only in terms of his opponent's mindset. Other curiosity had its place, but during a match it would only be a potentially fatal distraction.

Shindou placed his stone, and since his opponent had just done so, setting the pace as it were, Akira took his time considering strategies before choosing his own first move. Then they settled into a steadier

rhythm, of pebbles and waves, patterns and aberrations, and Akira sank wholly into the game.

It had been four years since he had last played Shindou, since he had consciously considered the then-rebel his childhood rival in Go, and his memory had not dimmed to the point of glossing over the constant frustration that had hounded him back then over the unrealized potential in his rival's game. Shindou had not, truly, been his rival-he only could have been, and Akira had desperately wanted him to be and so never judged objectively then. And yet still he had never met anyone quite Shindou's equal.

In this match, though, four years later... Shindou had surpassed himself. His play was no longer rough, half-engaged, mystifying; it was honed, wielded with conscious precision, and an even greater ability to backstep, sideswipe, and fool the senses of even common sense just long enough to gain an advantage. In the first few hands it became clear that somewhere in the four years Akira hadn't known him Shindou had gained a dedication to the game that rivaled Akira's own-he had committed himself to it, and done so with a passion Akira would never have dared hope for ever before.

Akira looked up at his opponent only once after the match started, not even doing so consciously. A tiny smile rested on Shindou's face, a smile that spoke and hid volumes. Something had changed him in Korea, or somewhere in between. Akira played him, part of his mind utterly focused and determined not to lose in the first match with his new, true rival; part of his mind wordlessly formlessly rejoicing, and hardly noticing or caring who won since that was of secondary as well as primary importance.

-What did it?- Akira asked still in much the same mood when they finally ended, half an eternity and mere moments later, while everyone around them swirled and talked inconsequentially.

Shindou gave him a little crooked smile, part hurt and part humor, and signed back, -The stupidest thing, really. When I had to be really, really good-that was... that was the first time I ever really saw

someone who looked at each game with plain simple joy. - His eyes seemed to lose their focus slightly, but he came back to himself-mostly-as he finished, -And now I have to play to remember that.-

Akira was sure, on some level, that he didn't understand the explanation at all; that there was too much in it Shindou wasn't actually telling him. But on another level that didn't matter, and he was content with knowing that for whatever reason he finally had the rival he had always hoped and strove for. Akira wasn't the one who had caused it, but Shindou was complete, a new whole, and Akira could only bless whoever was responsible for that transformation since they would both be reaping the benefit.

Shindou's gaze flicked down to the board, and when he returned it to Akira's his smile seemed more normal, a little smug, a little taunting. -You lost.-

Akira felt a smile grow on his own face in response, still completely uncaring of all the other people around them. -Then I demand a rematch.-

-What if I just win again?-

-Then we keep playing until I win.-

-Then until I win.-

-I'll make Meijin first.-

-I'll make Honinbou first.-

-Race you,- Akira signed, whispering the same, and feeling like he could smile for the rest of his life.